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Abstract

Considering four separate literatures (Serbian, Croatian, Slcvenian, and Macedonian) as one general body of Yugoslav literature, the significance and evolutiсn of current literary genres since 1945 are noted. The effects of varying political conditions, controversies over fundamental literary questions, important thematic changes, and increased awareness of foreign literatures are considered in this article. The rejection of the Russian concept of "socialist realism" by Yugcslav writers is emphasized in reference tc particular works. (RL)

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# Vasa D. Mihailovich

## Yugoslav Literature Since World War II

OF ALL THE major Slavic literatures, the Yugoslav has been the slowest to gain the recognition it deserves. Existing at the border between the West and East European worlds, it has frequently been overlooked simply because we tend to look straight across the border to find the genuinely different in the other domain—this in the belief that what is nearer is likely to be similar to, if not identical with, us. Yugoslav writers themselves have often been baffled by which world to call their home. But because they belong to both, it seems to me that Yugoslav writers have the right to call attention to their achievements as visible illustrations of what is best, and at times what is worst, in both cultural spheres. When we read or discuss Yugoslav literature, therefore, we should keep in mind that we are dealing with a literature that can best demonstrate an imaginary synthesis of the West and the East on the European literary scene.

Granted, that is not an easy task. To begin with, there is no such thing as Yugoslav literature in the strict sense of the word. Four separate literatures, Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian and Macedonian, plus literatures of several minorities, comprise the general body of Yugoslav literature. While all these literatures have since 1918 shared the same fate and developed under the same external dictates, they have also been governed by the laws of their specific natures, the laws which can be traced back to the time when, centuries ago, these South Slavic tribes were one and used one language. Today, unfortunately, only Serbs and Croats can read each others' literature without difficulty, whereas the literatures of Slovenes and Macedonians, not to speak of various minorities, are frequently as foreign to the Serbs and Croats as are those of other Slavic nationalities. In order to avoid the useless weighing of one literature against the other, the gen-

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eral term Yugoslav literature will be used and spoken of as a unit, while the fine differences must be left for a much more detailed endeavor.

What is the contemporary Yugoslav literature? Since the change of political systems at the end of World War II also meant a radical change in the cultural life of the country, the year 1945 is considered a natural watershed of cultural, as well as political epochs. To be sure, at that time the future course was known to but a few leaders; the rest was waiting and wishing for a better future. The climate in which Yugoslav literature found itself in 1945 has remained, with a few exceptions, basically the same until the present, thus preserving a certain continuity during the last two decades. For these reasons, it is quite appropriate to call the entire period from 1945 to the present contemporary Yugoslav literature.

It might be opportune to trace briefly the historical development of contemporary Yugoslav literature, for, without the knowledge of the circumstances under which it came into being and developed, many present aspects and trends cannot be fully understood, much less appreciated.

One could easily compare the transition in Yugoslavia in 1945 with that of Russia in 1917: the same messianic character of the new "truth" and the new "saviors"; the same religious belief in a better world and a glorious future; the same zeal and ruthlessness with which the new system established itself and eradicated any opposition. Yet, there was a difference which, I think, to a certain degree influenced later development not only in political and social life, but also in the matters of culture. The independence with which the communist party came to power during the war, a rather different make-up of the Yugoslav arena, the fact that the need for a drastic revolution of the Russian type was not nearly as pressing or imminent, a period of a relative democracy between the wars—these and other factors dictated and colored the changes that took place. For these reasons, the transition in literature could not be as complete as perhaps some of the new leaders desired.

Nevertheless, for the first three years, the atmosphere of tight controls, of prescribed themes and methods, and of unabashed glori-

fication of the people's War of Liberation and the building of a new society along communist lines was dominant. The writers who between the wars expounded leftist, if not openly communist, ideas were clearly giving the tone. Many writers who were hoping to empty their drawers of manuscripts written during the war were eventually convinced that a new era had arrived to stay. Some prominent interwar writers (I. Andrić, M. Krleža, V. Petrović, V. Nazor, F. Bevk, P. Voranc, A. Gradnik) welcomed the change and declared themselves willing to be active in the new society. A certain number refused to cooperate and to appear in print, while several well-known writers were liquidated. Thus it became clear that, despite the efforts of some politically engaged writers, the new epoch in Yugoslav literature was still peopled with the familiar faces of the already established authors. Through this, however, literature was able to preserve the continuity with the interwar literature—a fact which, first, prevented Yugoslav literature from becoming the servant of the establishment and, somewhat later, enabled a freer and saner atmosphere to prevail, as we shall see later.

And so it was Ivo Andrić, an apolitical and unengaged prewar writer, who gave the breath of life to the new literature with his three great novels, *The Bridge on the Drina*, *The Chronicle of Travink* and *Miss*. These novels won everybody's praise, all the more so since they came from one of the leading interwar writers. Great as they were, however, they were somewhat anachronistic at the time. Dealing with the distant past, they contain not a single line of praise for the recent victory over the national enemies. For this was the general tenor of the new literature: the extolling of the heroic deeds of the guerrilla forces and their leadership. In this respect Yugoslav literature came very close to emulating the official theory of Soviet literature—Socialist Realism.

Other works at this time were meant to do just that, especially in poetry. But, not surprisingly, aside from Andrić's novels and a few successful poems and stories, not many great works appeared. The established prewar writers, aside from lending their name and prestige, produced little of good new literature. Even those works, officially sanctioned and encouraged, which tried to varnish reality, to show life not as it is but as it ought to be, were artistic failures.

For some reason, the theory of socialist realism never took real hold among Yugoslav writers, except among those more politically than artistically minded. Even the seemingly palatable explanations—terrible suffering and sacrifices during the war, a need for a breathing spell, a necessity for a period of orientation and re-adjustment—failed to account for a noticeable dearth of genuine works of art. It was obvious to many observers, and all the more so to writers directly involved, that an atmosphere of pressure, prescription and not-so-gentle guidance was simply not conducive to creating good literature.

Then came the year 1948 and the fateful break with the Soviet Union. The impact of this epochal event in the cultural circles was commensurate to that in other walks of life. Since the cultural developments normally move much more slowly and cautiously and do not show immediate symptoms, it took writers another year or two to call for examination and eventual revision of the existing situation. After the first stirrings and demands for change, the struggle between the "old" forces (although in themselves only a few years in existence) and the new quickly developed into a full fledged cultural war. The first shot in this war was fired by a young Serbian writer, Dobrica Ćosić, with his novel *Distant Is the Sun* (1951). Himself a former partisan and a follower of the new order, Ćosić depicted in simple but deeply human tones the struggle of a partisan unit against the occupator. The bravery of the partisan force and the enormous capacity for suffering on the part of the villagers are shown here, as in many works at that time. But what made this novel exceptional—in addition to its beauty in simplicity—was a large dose of objectivity never before heard in Yugoslav literature. The partisan leaders were not always heroes and they were susceptible to mistakes like any other mortal. The wisdom of the entire partisan movement was subjected, indirectly to be sure, to doubt and re-examination. Burning questions posed here were not simply rhetorical questions, they demanded answers—all the more so since the novel immediately became a classic of the early period of the contemporary Yugoslav literature, which it has remained to this day.

The opposing forces were composed of the defenders of the *status quo*, for a better term called "the realists," and the challengers of the *status quo*, who were labeled "the modernists" because of their

advocacy of greater freedom, above all the freedom to experiment. I am not so sure that by labeling the realists so, the modernists did not have the term "socialist realism" foremost in mind, and that their opponents used the label modernism derogatorily, since modernism is frequently used in socialist countries as a catch-all epithet for everything that is "reactionary," "decadent," and "removed from reality." However, these terms were used as they related primarily to literary groups and literary politics, rather than as terms of literary theory and history.

It would be a mistake to assume that in this struggle the fronts were always clearly drawn or that the realists were exclusively the supporters of the regime whereas the modernists, in their opposition to the existing literary situation, were always opposing the entire political system. In both camps there were those who believed that the nature of state government was not questioned at all and that the controversy was confined to purely artistic matters. In fact, the entire argument was carried on by ardent supporters of the system. Only toward the end of the controversy, about the middle of the 'fifties, was a new note injected by the so-called second generation of post-war writers, which had in the meantime arrived unnoticed on the scene (M. Bulatović, St. Raičković, V. Popa, M. Pavlović, B. Miljković, S. Mihalić, M. Slaviček, C. Vipotnik, C. Zlobec, A. Hieng).

The struggle between the realists and modernists was fundamental, long, and bitter. The realists defended their positions ineptly, relying more on the support from the party officials than on the force of their arguments. Their view was that literature must, first of all, serve society, that society is governed by immutable Marxist laws, and that any deviation from the straightforward, socially tinged depiction of reality is a malignant growth of formalism, estheticism, etc. Their chief organ was the periodical *Savremenik*. The modernists refuted these views as undemocratic, constrictive, and stale. They demanded the abolition of dictates by the authorities, a greater freedom of creativity and, above all, freedom to experiment. The modernists were gathered around the magazine *Delo*.

Speaking in regional terms, the struggle was most keenly felt in Serbia and Slovenia, while Croatia was relatively calm at that time. Belgrade bore the brunt of the battles due, undoubtedly, to the cen-

tralization of the state. Although there were some non-Serbian writers active in Belgrade, it was primarily the Serbs who initiated and carried the battle and suffered the consequences most acutely. This is in no way meant to imply that writers of other nationalities were indifferent to the issues at stake or docilely supporting the *status quo*.

The fact that some of the leading figures of the interwar leftist, pro-communist surrealistic movement (M. Ristić, O. Davičo) were among the modernists certainly gave the lie to the realists' argument that the modernists were decadent, irresponsible or even hostile to the new order. There was indeed an irony in this reversal of roles. Between the wars, the surrealists were the forerunners of the wrecking crew whose task was to undermine and eventually bring down the bourgeois order of the monarchy. For this purpose they used the most ruthless methods, attacking the very foundations of bourgeois "conservative" and "reactionary" morality. After the war, the surrealists rose again, this time against their own brethren, whose path they helped to clear, indeed, of whose cloth they themselves were made. But if there was an irony in the new situation, the surrealists were certainly consistent. And while they were destructive in their previous efforts, they were now playing a constructive role in bringing about, first, the relaxation of tension and the removal of restrictions and, then, a considerable amount of freedom in artistic creativity by the end of the 'fifties.

By 1955, the struggle had reached its climax, after which the triumph of the modernists was assured. Undoubtedly, the developments in the Soviet Union (the destalinization process) and in Yugoslavia itself (greater liberalization in many areas of everyday life) contributed to this victory. But what really hastened the defeat of the realists was a growing demand on the part of the public for a more sophisticated, more meaningful approach to literature—a demand that had existed before the war but was suppressed or deliberately neglected in the first five years after the war. The victory, of course, was not expressed in wild celebrations, vendettas, or a complete turn-about in Yugoslav literary life. It was rather a somber but deeply satisfying enjoyment of the hard-won fruits of relative freedom.

Since 1955, the situation has by no means been as clear and decisive as the victory of the modernists would suggest. Although the realists have lost much of their power, and even more of their prestige as artists, they are still heard from now and then, attempting to belittle the magnitude of the modernists' victory and to reassert their significance or the necessity for their existence as a balancing force. As a matter of fact, in the last year or so, a renewal of the old controversy can be witnessed in the pages of periodicals and the daily press. Much is being written about the real meaning of the struggle in the late 'forties and early 'fifties. A sharp accusation and a warning are hurled by a realist at an opponent, who immediately retorts caustically by calling the challenger a neozhdanovist. Of course, the former participants in the verbal battle now enjoy the benefit of hindsight—many pieces have fallen into their place and many a spade is called a spade. While some critics attempt to place the entire episode in a historical perspective, others reminisce nostalgically like veterans at a convention many years after the war. Time is taking its toll, however. Yet another generation, the so-called third generation, burst upon the scene in the early 'sixties, a generation, facing its own problems and seeking its own solutions that wants little of the past squabbles. Of the first postwar generation, some writers have left the scene, some have gone to seed, while others have attained the wisdom and serenity that only ripe age can bring.

Let us now turn to the notable achievements of Yugoslav literature in the last two decades and, at the same time, indicate some of the themes that have preoccupied the writers. Undoubtedly, the greatest heights in this period were reached in the novel. At the very beginning, as indicated, Andrić published his three novels, two of which, *The Bridge on the Drina* and *The Chronicle of Travnik*, have already become classics, especially the former. Andrić's dwelling on the past, however, gave his novels a special position, which they have enjoyed ever since. During the period of abortive socialist realism, not too many great works appeared in any genre. The ice was broken at the beginning of the 'fifties with the already discussed *Distant Is the Sun*. Davičo's novel, *The Poem* (1952), although presenting a positive hero type, signalled a change—the positive hero could be

made less offensive, after all. In the struggle against the occupator, a young high school student finds in his own professor a greater enemy than the foreign invaders were. With this delicate relationship, and even more with the subtle, psychologically illuminated transformation of a bourgeois professor into another fighter against the common enemy, Davičo has interwoven his dazzling mastery over language and style, which has made him one of the most accomplished of all Yugoslav writers.

The works of Mihailo Lalić are receiving increasing acclaim. In his novels dealing with the last war (*The Wedding*, *The Evil Spring*, *The Chase*), he goes to the roots of the terrible nightmare of fratricidal extermination. His *Wailing Mountain* is considered one of the best novels in all Yugoslav literature. The hero is an intellectual partisan, left behind enemy lines to uphold the spirit of the people. Hunted like an animal and forced to employ various tricks simply to stay alive, he is in the course of the novel stripped of the last veneer of civilization, reaching that primordial stage where the only concern is one's own naked self. Branko Ćopić similarly treats partisan heroes in his best novels, *The Noiseless Gunpowder* and *The Eighth Offensive*. In the former, the author metaphorically portrays the common people who, quiet and distrustful, are not eager to accept fancy slogans and romantic revolutionary notions. In the latter, the process of readjustment of partisan heroes from villages to the heady big city life is called "the eighth offensive" (the first seven being the enemy offensives during the war).

Of the younger writers, no other has engendered such interest, reaping both acclaim and anathemas, as Miodrag Bulatović. His two novels, *The Red Cock Flies to Heaven* and *The Hero on a Donkey or The Time of Shame*, as well as a short-story collection, *The Devils Are Coming*, have placed him among the leading contemporary writers. *The Hero on a Donkey* deserves brief attention. Its antihero is a small-town inn-keeper in Montenegro, whose greatest ambition is to become "the greatest communist in the world" and "the most famous partisan leader in history." In reality, he only provides drinks for perpetually drunk Italian soldiers and peddles pornography to them. When he finally decides to join the partisans, he is derided by everyone and sent on a donkey back to town, where he

hangs himself in a chicken-coop. It was almost to be expected that such an anti-hero and anti-war presentation would become the focus of sharpest criticism on the part of some, mostly non-literary, elements. The book was destroyed after it had been set to print. *The Hero on a Donkey* is yet to appear in book form in Yugoslavia, although it has already been translated into several languages.

It is evident from these examples that Yugoslav writers cannot escape the war trauma. But more often than not, they treat this topic in an independent and unsparing fashion. For most of them war, even the war that brought about the creation of the socialist state, has become, not a glorious fanfare or a contest in heroics, but a degrading and dehumanizing process, perpetuating the evil rather than solving it.

In the last few years, several remarkable novels have appeared, by writers of both the older and the younger generations. A venerable Serbian writer, Miloš Crnjanski, who recently returned to Yugoslavia after twenty-five years abroad, has written *The Second Book of Migrations*, a sequel to a novel he wrote in 1929. Like the first book, it is an epic tale about the fate of the eighteenth-century Serbs under the Austro-Hungarian rule and their ambition to emigrate to Russia. Krleža has published the latest in a long series of works, a novel *The Banners*, dealing, as is his wont, with the decay of the Austro-Hungarian empire. *The Cyclope*, by a Croat Ranko Marinković, is an allegorical tale of the monstrosity of a big city and the irrationality of war. And a Bosnian, Meša Selimović, has just written a beautiful, thought-provoking novel, *The Dervish and Death*, in which he muses in poetic fashion about two of the oldest dilemmas of man's existence—power and death. (Andrić treated a similar subject two decades ago in his short novel, *The Accursed Yard*.)

In the realm of the short story—a genre of which the Yugoslavs have always been fond—the storytellers have decidedly moved away from the folklorist, narrow-provincial short story cultivated since the middle of the last century. Yet there have been no supreme achievements to match, say, the virtuosity of Andrić's prewar stories or the present supremacy of the novel. Of the prominent or (very few) exclusively short-story writers, F. Bevk, P. Šegedin, I. Dončević,

S. Novak, V. Kaleb, V. Majer, M. Kranjec, C. Kosmač and A. Isaković should be singled out. A strange paucity of excellence can be observed in drama. Although there are some good individual plays, especially those written for radio and television, only a few are memorable works. Among the best playwrights are M. Krleža (*Aretej*), M. Božić, M. Bor, V. Lukić.

In poetry, the picture is much rosier. It is in this genre that the main battles between the realists and modernists were fought and won, since the matter of form—the bone of contention most fiercely fought about—is perhaps nowhere so important as in poetry. Moreover, the prewar poetry was rich in both thematic and formalistic variety (witness the surrealist movement), so that the young poets have a rich well to draw from. The present poets are virtuosi of word, figure, and sense combinations, far better than anything written before. There are, to be sure, "traditionalists" who still sing of their personal emotional concerns, but the most accomplished poets are more concerned with the cosmic problems of existence and the associative world of the subconscious. In addition, there is a strong trend toward the mythological and purely intellectual approach to contemporary reality. Space does not permit us to go into greater detail here; to do justice to the manifold aspects of Yugoslav contemporary poetry one needs not merely the enumeration of names and poems but an extensive analysis. Let it be mentioned in summation that some of the poets (Oskar Davičo, Miodrag Pavlović, Vasko Popa, Stevan Raičković, Jure Kaštelan, Vesna Parun, Matej Bor, etc.) have approached the level of the better modern world poetry.

One of the most interesting and refreshing achievements is the emergence of a new literature after centuries of underground existence—the Macedonian. An entirely new written language had to be created for this purpose. In a relatively short time, Macedonian writers have almost reached the level of other, much older Yugoslav literatures. Although their achievements stand somewhat below those in other literatures—which is quite understandable—the Macedonians have already developed all genres and created traditions upon which they could fall back. Among the pioneers and most accomplished of Macedonian writers are Aco Šopov, Slavko Janevski (*The Village Behind Seven Ash-trees*), Blaže Koneski, Mateja Matevski and Cane Andreevski—most of these excelling in poetry.

The reputation of Yugoslav literature abroad is steadily growing. It was practically unknown outside before World War One, and somewhat better known between the wars. It was only after the last war, but more exactly in the last decade, that it has become familiar to foreign readers. The lion's share in this respect belongs to Andrić, especially after receiving the Nobel Prize in 1961. His *Bridge on the Drina* has been translated, according to the last count, into over sixty languages. The next most-translated writer is Miodrag Bulatović. It is perhaps his depiction of the modern man that appeals to foreign readers. There is indeed a certain charm in the mixture of expressionistic, impressionistic, and symbolic styles that he interchanges with abandon. Other writers lag somewhat behind those two. Krleža is certainly well-known, especially in Central Europe, where most of his works are set. Lalić's novels are also often translated. Among the Slovenes, Kosmač's works, especially *Day in the Spring*, have been translated into several languages. Other translated writers are Marinković, Desnica, Koš, Vučo, Konstantinović, Olujić and, of course, Djilas. In fact, most leading Yugoslav writers today have been made available in major foreign languages. In the last few years alone there have been two anthologies of prose and one of poetry in English. And more translations are in preparation.

This, of course, is not a one-way street. In addition to having practically every significant work of world literature translated, many Yugoslav writers read in the original, follow closely and discuss uninhibitedly the main foreign writers and their works, and try to learn from them. It would take us away from our purpose here to trace foreign influence on Yugoslav writers. Let me just mention that the French writers seem to be most appealing to young Yugoslavs (Sartre, Camus, Beckett, Butor, Robbe-Grillet, etc.), but the British and the Americans (T. S. Eliot, Auden, Faulkner, Hemingway, Salinger) seem not to be far behind. Of the Russians, Gorky, Sholokhov, Babel and Mayakovsky are most preferred.

Today, although there are still poems, stories and novels about the last war, their number is steadily diminishing. There is a growing tendency to treat the last war rather objectively. To be sure, not all warring sides are yet treated with equal fairness, but the Yugoslavs are beginning to look at war not so much as a conflict of oppos-

ing ideologies but as a process of dehumanization and utter senselessness. But just as they are no longer willing to glorify war, they are equally reluctant to depict everyday problems, especially where the social conditions are concerned. No so much, in my belief, from fear of persecution but simply because such subjects and methods are considered *déclassé* now and perhaps because they smack of socialist realism. Instead, writers concentrate on man in all his wondrous vicissitudes. Their picture of man is usually that of a lonely, complex-ridden, at times bewildered individual but, strangely enough, not of a desperate, hopeless, embittered creature. While the "polishing" of socialist realism is gone once and for all, its opposite—cynical indifference—has not taken its place. Many good writers shun political engagement. The only engagement they are willing to enter into is in the effort to harmonize the individual or national interests with those of mankind, indeed to place the interest of all mankind over the individual and national; furthermore, an engagement to humanize the increasing technicalization of our civilization. Other common phenomena are the flight into the world of fantasy, sometimes entirely removed from our day and place, and the "black humor," with which writers try to palliate the bitter fruits of life. There is also an increasing amount of psychological penetration and poetically inspired prose. In poetry, there is an inclination toward neo-classicism and abstract cerebralism.

Perhaps the most interesting happening is a large number of new faces. The third postwar generation (B. Šćepanović, D. Kiš, D. Filip, M. Kovač, P. Zidar, Ž. Čingo) has surprised everyone with relative maturity, gracious poise, and remarkable *savoir faire* about modern approaches to literature. Of course, these young writers are reaping the fruits of victory that the previous generations fought out. But the youngsters are quite understanding about it. They do not show an exaggerated gratitude, nor do they rebel against their fathers, as one has almost come to expect from the present youth. They go about their work in a surprisingly routine fashion. In the last few years, several works of these authors have drawn attention by the seriousness of their subject matter and, above all, by their technical skill. So much so, that one is almost tempted to think of them as precocious and somehow unreal. To be sure, not everything they publish is of

equally high quality, but the potential is there and the conditions are not too unfavorable, certain still existing restrictions notwithstanding.

The old maxim that an artist creates best when he is left alone to his inner ferment and to his dreams has proven itself once again. The young writers in Yugoslavia, much more so than in Russia, have the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the present developments and achievements of other literatures, and they are taking advantage of it. Many are traveling to, and staying for longer periods in, foreign countries, where they can both broaden their vision and improve their skill.

Speaking of the younger Yugoslav writers, a well-known Croatian essayist, Marijan Matković, expressed himself this way: "A specific national symbolism and the deep unexplored sources of the age-old anonymous Balkan literature speak in their pages in a modern idiom suggestive of the drama and destiny not only of exceptional individuals and isolated events, but of the fate of a country which only lately has erected bridges toward the shores of the wide world from which it was artifically separated for centuries by a cruel history." Thus it seems that contemporary Yugoslav writers will continue to be attached to their native soil while at the same time reaching for the universal goals and endeavoring to portray their own time and visions. Although the general tone is still being given by the older writers and by the "grand old men"—Andrić, Krleža, Crnjanski, etc.—it is this youngest generation that is indeed making the future of Yugoslav literature an exciting one. Barring an unforeseen reversal into former rigid controls—a development hardly possible under the present circumstances—Yugoslav literature has already indicated that the future is most likely to be fruitful and bright.

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